



Mary Weatherford
Debs & Co., through Sat 6
(see Chelsea).

In recent shows, painter Mary Weatherford has offered a kind of "lite" abstraction, combining washes of offbeat color with liberal sprinklings of such decorative collage elements as seashells and starfish. Such sea-life details may or may not have been immediately related to Weatherford's move last year from New York to her native coastal California, but it's obvious from this exhibition that she still combs the beaches and attaches what she finds there to canvases. She also continues to work on a larger scale (some canvases are roughly five by four feet): In *Absorbent*, for example, a bright yellow oval resides on the canvas surface with large bath sponges that stick out in a friendly and playful way.

But the real action here happens in a collection of smaller paintings--most



Mary Weatherford, *Swamp*, 2000.

nine by twelve inches--which Weatherford appears to have dashed off quicker than you can say "haiku." The best is *Swamp*, a small study executed in moody blue, with a suggestion of reeds dropped in by a few feathery strokes that evoke ancient Japanese painting. A close second is *Boat Race*, in which Weatherford plays Whistler by dividing a horizontal panel into two washes of muted color that instantly become sky and sea when one realizes that the tiny flecks of black paint represent boats.

Some of the other small paintings include shells, sponges and starfish. Perhaps the best of these is *Shell Cloud*, in which Weatherford creates a sweet little mosaic of tiny pink shells to compose a "cloud" and then sets it afloat in a loosely figurative evocation of sky and sea. Finally, in *Seawall*, Weatherford lines the bottom of a small gray painting with rows of stacked-up shells. This painting in particular offers proof of Weatherford's talents: Coming as close as it does to beach-resort kitsch and cuteness, the painting nevertheless takes one's breath away by soaring into a kind of imagist poetry. In such a tour de force, Weatherford proves that the tropes of "low" seaside painting can be transformed into a fine-art aesthetic, making her paintings all the more amazing when she succeeds.

-Robert Mahoney